Play channels Gen Z climate rage; 'Is My Microphone On' explores youth response to global emergency

The Toronto Star

September 6, 2021 Monday

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Section: LIFE; Pg. B12

Length: 1083 words

Byline: Karen Fricker Theatre Critic "is My Microphone On?" Runs At The High Park Amphitheatre Through Sept. 19. See For Tickets And Information. Canadianstage.com Heatre Critic And A Freelance Contributor For The Star. Follow Her On Twitter: @karenfricker2

Body

"We made this for you," say the teenagers. "And for ourselves of course. But mostly to tell you it's over. Your world. Time's up."

These challenging words are spoken by some of the 17 performers in "Is My Microphone On?" a new theatre piece running at the High Park Amphitheatre in a Canadian Stage production. Written by Canadian playwright and novelist Jordan Tannahill, the piece presents the climate emergency as a generational inheritance that baby boomers and Gen Xers have passed on to today's youth, and channels the fury of Greta Thunberg and other youth climate activists.

It's one of several projects written by 33-year-old Tannahill happening in Toronto this late summer and fall, including the Canadian launch of his second novel, "The Listeners," and "Draw Me Close," a project combining virtual reality, animation and live performance that will run at Soulpepper Theatre before the end of the year.

The title "Is My Microphone On?" is a direct quote from Thunberg's speech to the U.K.'s Parliament in April 2019. She wasn't literally asking if the technology was working; she was, in Tannahill's words, "decrying the state of affairs, asking 'What more do you need to act?'" This speech happened in the same month as major Extinction Rebellion protests in London, England, where Tannahill lives; he was arrested while participating in the occupation of Waterloo Bridge.

"Before COVID kind of upended everything, I was really inspired by the Gen Z-led response to the climate ... the student strikers have been such a pivotal force in that climate activism," said Tannahill. When he was approached by the Theater der Welt (Theatre of the World) festival in Düsseldorf to write a piece for young people, he decided to channel that generation's response to the climate emergency.

"Is My Microphone On?" reunites Tannahill, Erin Brubacher and Cara Spooner, the three lead creative team members of "Concord Floral," another piece performed by an ensemble of young people that premiered in 2014 at the Theatre Centre in Toronto. Brubacher is the director and dramaturge and Spooner is the choreographer of "Is My Microphone On?" which also features musical compositions by Veda Hille, and set and costume design by Sherri Hay.

The team's plans for a world premiere staging in Düsseldorf in 2020 with a cast of 25 and a choir of 75 had to be "drastically reimagined for COVID," said Tannahill. Brubacher and other team members worked on building a creative community with a core group of German youth on Zoom over the past year. There were two outdoor public

showings of a scaled-back version of the show as part of Theater der Welt this June, initially directed by Brubacher online and then in person by Bassam Ghazi.

"This Canadian premiere feels in some ways like the first chance the original creative team will have to present the piece in a fuller realization," said Tannahill.

The summer's drastic weather and the calling of a federal election have conspired to render this Toronto staging all the more topical: The production closes the day before the election. "Everyone in the cast is below the voting age," said Tannahill. "They're between 12 and 17, and they're really trying to create a space where adults, or the audience in general, can consider the long-term implications of their vote: which candidates, which parties, which policies are really going to help preserve, frankly, life on Earth for future generations?"

As with "Concord Floral," the words the young people speak were written by Tannahill. He calls his writing process "a way of aggregating a lot of voices ... I think what Erin and myself and the other artists in the show are bringing is kind of like a craft that helps shape the sentiments in the show."

About five to seven per cent of the lines are direct quotes from Thunberg's public speeches; Tannahill is giving 10 per cent of his writer's royalties for the play to her foundation.

While Tannahill has remained in the U.K. in the run-up to this production, he's been providing rewrites and updates. "We have the B.C. wildfires, the Greek wildfires, the billionaires launching themselves into space in their penis-shaped rockets," said Tannahill. "We will actively encourage any future productions or any other directors to update the text so that it really reflects not only the current state of the world but also specifically the locale that it's set within."

Tannahill moved to London in 2016, primarily for a romantic relationship, but also to shift the tone and tempo of his creative life. From 2012 to '16 he co-ran Videofag, a tiny and influential performance space in the front room of his and his then-partner William Ellis's apartment in Kensington Market.

"I was hosting performances almost every day," said Tannahill. "I was so immersed in the scene there."

Moving to London "has been an immense opportunity for me to grow as an artist and a person in terms of extending my palette of references, seeing new work, encountering different artists, different perspectives, and it's given me a bit of time to work on larger projects," said Tannahill.

One of these is "The Listeners," which in its way ties into the theme of climate change that is so central to "Is My Microphone On?": it's the story of people affected by the real-life phenomenon called "the hum," a constant low-level noise that some people around the world have reported hearing since the 1970s, and which has been variously attributed to industrial noise pollution, geoscientific causes and government mind control. His interest in the hum "can certainly be connected to our human relationship with nature, and the complicated and unknowable nature of that relationship," said Tannahill. Much of his work is preoccupied by "the ways in which we are living in discord with the natural world."

Among the changes that have been introduced to this version of "Is My Microphone On?" are references to the natural environment in High Park. Tannahill thinks that these outside performances will be "an appropriate return to the theatre" for many. The show is "really about this collective live reckoning with the most pressing issues of our time, but also a joyful and hopeful one ... it's really very much a ritual of how we come together again."

"Is My Microphone On?" runs at the High Park Amphitheatre through Sept. 19. See canadianstage.com for tickets and information.

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Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Journal Code: TTA

Subject: ADOLESCENTS & TEENS (90%); THEATER (90%); WRITERS (90%); ARTISTS & PERFORMERS (89%); CLIMATE ACTION (89%); GENERATION Z (89%); THEATER & DRAMA (89%); NEGATIVE PERSONAL NEWS (78%); DRAMA LITERATURE (77%); FESTIVALS (77%); MUSIC (77%); MUSIC GROUPS & ARTISTS (77%); NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS (77%); VISUAL & PERFORMING ARTS (77%); FICTION LITERATURE (76%); NEGATIVE MISC NEWS (74%); PROTESTS & DEMONSTRATIONS (74%); VIRTUAL EVENTS (73%); BABY BOOMERS (72%); CHOREOGRAPHY (72%); COSTUME & SET DESIGN (72%); MUSIC COMPOSITION (71%); NOVELS & SHORT STORIES (71%); GENERATION X (70%); ANIMATION (68%); COVID CORONAVIRUS (64%); TRENDS & EVENTS (64%)

Industry: WRITERS (90%); ARTISTS & PERFORMERS (89%); FESTIVALS (77%); MUSIC GROUPS & ARTISTS (77%); COSTUME & SET DESIGN (72%); ANIMATION (68%); VIRTUAL REALITY (68%)

Person: GRETA THUNBERG (73%)

Geographic: TORONTO, ON, CANADA (92%); LONDON, ENGLAND (70%); ONTARIO, CANADA (88%); CANADA (93%); ENGLAND (79%); UNITED KINGDOM (79%)

Load-Date: September 6, 2021

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